GRASSROOTS FORUM ON THE FUTURE OF WORK

A. Context & Purpose

On June 18, 2026, the Global Fairness Initiative (GFI) and our partners convened the Grassroots Forum on the Future of Work in Nairobi, Kenya, bringing together more than 180 participants from government, worker organizations, civil society, academia, and the private sector — 70% of them representing worker organizations. Rooted in GFI's belief that worker voice is key to equitable and sustainable economic growth, the forum provided a unique platform for informal workers to shape the dialogue on Africa's rapidly changing labour landscape.

Africa stands at a critical juncture: informal employment accounts for more than 85% of all jobs across the continent [1], and in Kenya, nearly nine out of every ten new jobs created over the last five years have come from the informal sector [2]. Yet the workers who sustain this economy remain disproportionately excluded from the conversations designed to address their needs.

The forum explored three interconnected themes: pathways to formalization and social protection; the specific realities of women and youth in the informal economy; and new and emerging forms of work reshaping employment across the continent.

> ***"The future of work is already here. The challenge is ensuring our protections, policies, and institutions evolve alongside it."***

B. Key Figures

- 90% of new Kenyan jobs are created in the informal sector[3]
- 67% youth unemployment rate in Kenya (2025)[4]
- KES 2–2.5 trillion: the estimated value of unpaid care and domestic work in Kenya, equivalent to 23% of GDP[5]

C. Forum Participants & Representation

The forum intentionally convened a diverse group of stakeholders, with seventy percent of attendees representing worker organizations to ensure that lived experience was central to the conversation. Stakeholders spanned a broad cross-section of society, from government bodies including the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and NSSF, to trade unions and worker organizations such as the Informal Sector Federation of Kenya (ISFEK), Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals & Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA), the Amalgamated Union of Kenya Metal Workers (AUKMW), and grassroots associations including the Ambira Jua Kali Association, informal economy worker associations, and youth and women worker representatives. Academic and research institutions were also present, including the Women Economic Empowerment Hub at the University of Nairobi and Dataworld Research, alongside civil society organizations such as the International Lawyers Assisting Workers (ILAW), and representatives from the private sector, and media.

D. Key Findings

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[1] **International Labour Organization.** (2024). *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office.

[2] **Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.** (2025). *Economic Survey 2025*. Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.

[3] (KNBS, 2025).

[4] https://www.fke-kenya.org/policy-issues/youth-employment?utm_source

[5] **Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.** (2025). *Economic Value of Unpaid Domestic and Care Work in Kenya*. Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.

i. **Social Protection Systems Are Not Keeping Pace**

Existing schemes, such as the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and Social Health Africa (SHA), remain largely inaccessible to informal and platform workers. SHA premiums of KES 24,000–40,000 annually are unaffordable for workers earning as little as KES 200 per day, with system downtime reported to have prevented a discharged patient from leaving hospital without cash payment. NSSF contributions are easy to make but notoriously difficult to access, with complex claims processes, requirements to trace former employers, and unreliable disbursement timelines. NSSF's Haba Haba initiative, allowing contributions as low as KES 25 per day, was welcomed as a step in the right direction, but awareness and uptake remain low.

ii. **Formalization Must Be A Pathway**

Participants consistently reframed formalization not as a compliance exercise but as a route to dignity, opportunity, and access to services. Key barriers include costly and complex registration processes, punitive enforcement by county authorities, lack of designated trading spaces, and skills that go unrecognized for lack of formal certification. The Jua Kali sector that employs millions of skilled youth remains largely excluded from resource allocation despite underpinning broader economic activity. Workers called for incentives, simplified pathways, and a national federation to give informal workers a unified policy voice.

iii. **Platform and Digital Work Is Outpacing Legal Protections**

The rapid growth of gig and platform-based work has created a legal grey zone. Workers classified as 'independent contractors' are denied minimum wage, maternity leave, social security, and collective bargaining rights despite being algorithmically managed and monitored. Customer ratings directly determine wages, meaning workers effectively report to an algorithm. Psychosocial hazards including burnout, PTSD from content moderation, and digital fatigue are not recognized as occupational hazards under existing frameworks. Attempts to organize collectively are actively suppressed by platform algorithms.

> ***"The world of work is changing faster than the systems designed to govern it."***
>
> ***— Anonymous Participant***

iv. **Women and Youth Bear the Sharpest Edge of Inequality**

Women spend up to seven times more on unpaid care and domestic work than men, valued at KES 2–2.5 trillion (23% of GDP), [6]yet this work remains unrecognized and unrewarded. Youth unemployment stands at 67%, [7]and despite innovation and entrepreneurship emerging as real pathways, rural-urban infrastructure gaps, gender-based discrimination, workplace harassment, and weak representation in governance structures compound exclusion. Women and youth account for nearly 80% of trade activities under African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)[8] yet were initially excluded from shaping the protocol that governs them.

v. **Worker Voice Remains Structurally Excluded**

Despite representing the majority of Kenya's economy, informal workers have limited influence over the policies that govern their work. Participants raised concerns about public participation processes that rarely produce visible feedback, policy spaces that favour government-mobilized supporters over independent worker voices, and governance structures where youth, women, and persons with disabilities remain systematically underrepresented. Trade union membership was cited as the most effective existing pathway for informal workers to be heard.

E. Panel Highlights

[6] (KNBS, 2025)..

[7] https://www.fke-kenya.org/policy-issues/youth-employment?utm_source

[8] **United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.** (2025, April 16). *The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade – Africa's blueprint for inclusive trade*. https://www.uneca.org/stories/blog-the-afcfta-protocol-on-women-and-youth-in-trade

- With 82% of Kenya's workforce in the informal sector [9] and 1.2 million elderly Kenyans facing hunger [10] [11] social protection is no longer optional. NSSF's HabaHaba initiative offers contributions from as little as KES 25 per day, accessible via mobile code *303#. Workers were encouraged:
- Women and youth are largely excluded from formal financial inclusion, accessing finance primarily for survival rather than growth. The National Care Policy's 5R framework of Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, and Represent offers a concrete anchor for policy reform.[12]
- Platform workers face algorithmic management, arbitrary account deactivation, and no right to collective bargaining. For the first time, the International Labour Conference (ILC) has recognized the risks for 'platform workers' and established digital labour standards, a milestone requiring urgent domestication into Kenyan law.

> ***"Can work really provide dignity, decent work, and innovation? How decent are the realities of work in Kenya today?"* — Jacqueline Wamai, International Lawyers Assisting Workers (ILAW)**

- Approximately 83–85% of Kenya's workforce is engaged in the informal economy.[13] SHA contributions have nearly doubled (from KES 6,000 to KES 13,000 annually) without a corresponding improvement in services. Informal workers need to have a seat at the table in shaping future policy and for the establishment of a recognized national federation for informal workers.

F. Key Recommendations

Social Protection & Formalization

- Expand flexible, income-responsive social protection contributions that reflect the irregular earnings patterns of informal workers
- Simplify and digitize NSSF claims and SHA enrollment, resolving system downtime and removing barriers such as tracing former employers
- Support county-level registration and designated trading spaces for informal businesses and tradespeople
- Create recognition-of-prior-learning pathways through National Industrial Training Authority(NITA) for skilled but unpapered youth
- Establish visible, mandatory feedback mechanisms for public participation forums so workers see outcomes
- Strengthen trade unions and actively encourage informal workers to join them as a pathway to policy influence
- Ensure explicit inclusion of PWDs, hawkers, and other marginalized groups in all planning and policy processes

Youth and Women in Work

- Invest in affordable, accessible childcare and care infrastructure to reduce the unpaid care burden limiting women's participation
- Institutionalize meaningful participation of women and youth in labour market governance and policy design
- Scale youth entrepreneurship support through access to financing, incubation, and markets

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[9] (KNBS, 2025).
[10] **National Drought Management Authority.** (2025). *Kenya Food and Nutrition Security Update*. Nairobi, Kenya: National Drought Management Authority.
[11] **HelpAge International.** (2024). *Older Persons in Kenya: Food Security and Social Protection*. London: HelpAge International.
[12] **Government of Kenya.** (2024). *National Care Policy*. Nairobi, Kenya: Ministry of Gender, Culture, the Arts and Heritage.
[13] (KNBS, 2025).

Emerging and New Forms of Work

- Enact a Platform Workers Act formally recognizing and regulating gig and digital work in line with emerging ILC standards
- Strengthen data protection, algorithmic accountability, and digital workers' right to freedom of association
- Integrate digital literacy, responsible digital citizenship, and labour rights into education and vocational training systems
- Adapt labour inspection systems and occupational safety frameworks to cover platform and digital work environments

G. Conclusions

Four overarching conclusions emerged from the Forum's deliberations:

- Policy responsiveness must be grounded in lived realities, ensuring that interventions reflect the experiences of workers rather than assumptions made on their behalf.
- Formalization should be understood as a pathway to dignity, protection, and opportunity, not a compliance or taxation exercise that penalizes the very workers it should serve.
- Skills development remains central to the future of work, requiring sustained investment across all age groups, and recognition and certification of prior skills.
- Strengthened solidarity and collective organization are essential for amplifying workers' voices in policy processes and ensuring accountability from all stakeholders.